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ABSTRACT

An informal survey of graduate student teaching assistants who were about to teach their first undergraduate composition course was undertaken by asking them what they planned to do with regard to teaching a number of concepts. Those questions were followed one week later by similar questions rephrased to ask what the novice teachers do themsleves in the writing process. A relatively high correspondence existed between what they planned to do in the classroom and what they do on their own when they write. The results of the survey suggest a need to emphasize the importance of prewriting techniques and for better methods for dealing with vocabulary and sentence problems. The survey procedure seems to be a practical first step to integrating writing into the teacher training curriculum and to focusing the new teachers' attention on the nature of their work in the classroom. Such systematic self-analysis can reveal strengths to encourage confidence and can indicate gaps to be filled. (TJ)

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Doing What I Do: How New Teachers of Writing Compose

The training of writing teachers at the graduate level, like the teaching of writing itself, is a process bound by time, the best pedagogy being the one most efficient in conveying skills and information. A writing practicum or seminar must introduce prospective teachers to a subject matter, suggest to them methods of conveying that matter and (the aspect that is the subject of this paper) provide them with a relationship to their material which translates into "authority" in the classroom. But since the subject matter of writing courses is also a skill, the teacher of composition is expected to do as well as to instruct, to be able to write as well as to teach writing. Is it possible to focus the attention of novice writing teachers on their composing skills as a shortcut to experience--that is, as a way of analyzing an already-existing relationship between practitioner and product for the purpose of securing a pedagogy on that analysis?

Many individuals with no particular commitment to writing, rhetoric, or non-literary composition become teaching associates or instructors in departments of English. Some have

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teaching experience. But few have pondered what writing means or what the composing process is or does. Hence they have but a narrow perspective on classroom methods or a writing program. They do not know how to judge or defend a syllabus, even a consistent one, or the assignments that develop from it. To ask them to face the interrogation of twenty-five or more inquisitive, doubting, hostile freshmen and to speak intelligently, judiciously, and authoritatively on matters of discovery, arrangement, and style without inquiring into their writing ability is like failing to ask the diving instructor whether he swims. In a few years or semesters, the writing teacher acquires the taste and tactics needed to guide students with confidence. But no paying students should feel that they are in the hands of amateurs. And many are.

Yet in our teacher training courses we substantially ignore the authorial dimension. We tell beginning teachers under our tutelage to act mature and confident in class, to dress well, to speak boldly, and to be prepared. Which is tantamount, I am afraid, to a physician trying to cure a patient with repeated admonitions of "get well." For the authority of a teacher in the classroom is more than a matter of surface style and confidence.

Hidden in the previous paragraph is the assumption that most instructors of writing can, indeed, compose with mechanical proficiency and some degree of style. Unfortunately the practical exigencies of a graduate course in teaching writing often prevent the instructor from wanting to pass judgment on the style of graduate students. For from the moment the Teaching Associate

walks into a classroom, he or she becomes a colleague, presumably above the dispassionate and embarrassingly minute analysis to which mere students are subjected.

The related needs to confer some measure of authority on the beginning teacher of writing and to ascertain the skill and mechanical competence of the instructors themselves argue for the usefulness of a writing component in a teacher training course, one based on a systematic analysis of the writing process and even of writing development. As a preliminary step toward the implementation of such a program, I surveyed a small group of T.A.'s this past autumn (Fall, 1978) to discover if there were significant differences between their perceptions of writing as a skill to be practiced and writing as a skill to be taught. The results are propaudeutic to more intensive investigation; my methods were exploratory, designed to sketch out what questions to ask and what methods to apply in the immediate future.

Before I explain what I did, I should explain some of what I did not do, and why. Since my investigation made no pretense to scientific method, I considered simply asking the prospective teachers of writing to compose an essay in which they responded to a version of the question posed recently by Timothy Donnovan in an issue of College Composition and Communication (December, 1978): "Why Write?" But I feared that such a question might lead rapidly to platitudinous self-expressive discourses on the role of the humanities in the modern world and the motivations that propel bright people to study English in the midst of an

enduring job crunch. I was not interested--at this point--in motives. I also considered a more focused essay topic, a graduate version of an assignment I use regularly in advanced undergraduate writing courses. There I ask students to describe in detail the process they follow in composing a particular essay. But while the responses I have received to this assignment have been uniformly interesting, they have not been sufficiently detailed or consistent for pedagogical analysis. Most of the undergraduate essays spend their energies in detailing the tribulations of the pre-writing stage, in explaining (often humorously) various strategies for not writing at all. Since the essay approach could not be relied upon to generate the detailed comparisons between writing as a process and a learned skill that I wanted, I resorted to a survey in two parts.

Filled out anonymously and without indications of a follow-up questionnaire, the first survey posed these eight particular, but open-ended questions to twenty Teaching Associates in their initial days of teaching the first semester Freshman writing course at the University of Texas at Austin:

1. What "pre-writing" techniques do you plan to recommend to your students?
2. How do you plan to teach organization? What principles of arrangement will you endorse?
3. Will you expect your students to organize paragraphs according to particular patterns?
4. What advice would you give to students who want to know how to construct more effective

sentences.

5. Will you teach your students to distinguish among simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences?
6. What methods of expanding vocabulary will you suggest to your students?
7. How many drafts of an essay will you require your students to write?
8. What procedures for revision will you recommend?

A week later, the follow-up questionnaire was distributed, this one asking the same questions rephrased to accomodate the teacher as writer. For example, the first question ("What 'pre-writing' techniques do you plan to recommend to your students?") became: "What pre-writing techniques do you use?"

Even granting the unscientific nature of my survey, I must acknowledge additional qualifications to any remarks I can offer. First, my sample was uneven. Twice as many T.A.'s filled out the first questionnaire as did the second. Further, although the teachers surveyed were, in most cases, novices, they had already been subjected to a week of workshops and lectures to prime them for their first classroom appearances before they completed the first survey form. Third, it took little ingenuity for T.A.'s to figure out the purpose of the survey once they received the second set of questions. It is possible that some

respondents modified their second set of answers to conform with their remarks on the first. Fourth, and the most significant limitation, the questions themselves implied a design and order to the composing process more rigid than may , in fact, be the case. I asked T.A.'s to discuss composing from a traditional analysis that conveniently splits writing into pre-writing, organizing, paragraphing, structuring sentences, choosing words, and revising. The design of the study in part shaped the responses to it.

But the questionnaire was not designed to describe the composing process, but to provide raw materials for subsequent analysis by the respondents. The significance of this defense should become plain later.

What surprised me in comparing the two surveys was a relatively high and intelligent correspondence between what the T.A.'s planned to do in their classrooms and what they did on their own when they wrote. In addition, the responses to the rather vague questions were thorough and enthusiastic. There is no new crisis hidden in the survey. But neither is there a uniformity of response.

In reply to the first question, on pre-writing procedures, the T.A.'s in both their roles (as teacher and as writer) championed the outline. Not unexpectedly, the novice teachers also recommended the outline as the best method of organization. The clear implication is that even though they knew what "pre-

writing" meant, they viewed it in a structural sense, as the time during which a writer puts together ideas already generated. Interestingly enough, while T.A.-teachers seldom recommended library research and reading as a pre-writing activity for their students, the T.A.-writers used these resources as personal heuristics. In both roles, T.A.'s regularly mentioned the importance of developing a thesis or topic sentence at the pre-writing stage, but whereas the T.A.-teacher talked about developing a thesis, the T.A. writer admitted to regularly examining and discarding several theses before beginning to compose. And while several teachers recommended formal heuristics to their students as a device for generating ideas (usually the journalist's questions or Burke's pentad), not one T.A.-writer confessed to ever using one. In answering these "pre-writing" questions, T.A.'s seemed uncertain about what teaching strategies they would recommend (other than the outline) to students who have difficulties in finding ideas or starting to write. Yet, in the undergraduate essays on the process of writing I mentioned briefly earlier, it is precisely this stage of composition that consistently provokes the most commentary and fear. Novice teachers (and more experienced ones as well) seem to have the fewest strategies to deal with what is, apparently, one of their students' greatest needs--overcoming the blankness of that first page.

Responses to the questions on organizing an essay parallel the responses to the questions on pre-writing. The outline is again the darling of both T.A.-writer and T.A.-teacher. But in

the teachers' remarks is a refreshing emphasis on the need for "organic structure," for patterns of organization fitted to rhetorical aims. Not one teacher mentioned the five-paragraph essay as a paradigm he or she planned to teach.

Responses to the questions on paragraphing indicated a sound notion of the difference between writing paragraphs and teaching paragraphing. While a majority of respondents admitted that they followed no conscious plan in organizing their own paragraphs, several (no doubt sensing the drift of the survey) argued that they could do that only because of an already-mature sense of what constitutes a paragraph. Most T.A.-teachers and T.A.-writers stressed the importance of some unifying idea within a paragraph. But there was no regular demand for topic sentences among the T.A.-teachers. The sentiment for teaching paragraph patterns was strong, but so was the pedagogically sophisticated insistence on transitional links within paragraphs.

At the sentence level, both the T.A.-teacher and the T.A.-writer seemed doubtful that any method could assure clarity and effectiveness. Many T.A.-teachers planned to urge their students to read more and to imitate and recast sentences they had read. Several mentioned "sentence-combining" as a potential pedagogical tool. Yet the T.A.-writers found it difficult to explain how they themselves went about the business of shaping sentences. The most typical comment was some variant of "I write roughly

and revise," a technique arguably akin to sentence-combining. While the T.A.-teachers were aware that the ability to recognize sentence types does not automatically transfer into productive capability, most insisted on teaching sentence types as a way of naming sentence structures and opening student writing up to the possibility of new sentence strategies. Yet in commenting on their own variations, the T.A.-writer seemed less concerned with sentence types than with varying absolute sentence length.

In the matter of vocabulary and word choice, an area that provokes more commentary than teaching in most Freshman English courses I suspect, T.A.-writers were unanimous in asserting that they made conscious efforts to hone and sharpen their diction. The keys to building vocabulary, they were certain, were reading and "looking up words you don't know." Most said that they followed this procedure themselves. Others, in the teacher role, recommended that students study word lists, circle unfamiliar expressions, and be quizzed on their reading. But several said bluntly that vocabulary should not be taught. Students, according to one T.A., "should know how to expand their vocabularies, <u>if they want to do so</u>." Thesauruses were generally distrusted, one T.A.-writer commenting, "I'd never go to a thesaurus and try to get a brand new word to stick into a paper."

The highest correlation between pedagogy and practice occurred in the number of drafts needed to produce a respectable piece of prose. Most T.A.-writers composed two drafts before their final copy, and recommended that procedure to their

students. No systematic revision procedures were advocated by the T.A.-writers; most said they liked to put a paper aside for a time, and many suggested that policy to their students too, along with careful re-reading. Curiously, the T.A.-writers seemed more willing to make substantial organizational shifts in their essays than they would demand from students. Many T.A.-teachers affirmed the importance of the commentary they make on student papers, but none mentioned their reaction to remarks and corrections made on their own work.

What use does this rather unsystematic exploration have for teachers of composition practicums? First, it suggests a need to emphasize to the novice teacher the importance of pre-writing techniques. Secondly, the new teacher needs better methods for dealing with vocabulary and sentence problems. But more important, the survey procedure seems to be a practical first step to integrating writing into the teacher training curriculum. For the value of asking teaching associates to question what they do when they write is not in what it tells the course instructor about a particular T.A., but in the way the assignment can focus a new writing teacher's attention on the nature of his or her work in the classroom. Systematic self-analysis can reveal strengths that encourage a teacher to speak confidently about shaping paragraphs or sentences; it may also reveal gaps in methods or practice that can be filled before students trip over them.

A natural next step to the questionnaires would be a carefully considered exploratory essay based on the T.A.-teacher/writer's assessment of the survey comparisons. In teacher-training courses that run concurrently with the subject being taught by the novices, I believe that it is prudent to limit the workload to that which has immediate application to the teaching assignment. The exploratory essay described here meets that criterion. An essay developing directly from a survey that deals explicitly with teaching and writing methodologies requires that teachers review their subject matter as a skill: the act of writing becomes the subject of study, observation, and introspection. Hidden assumptions and beliefs grow to articulation as new teachers begin to perceive that their classroom roles are part of a discipline that studies language and the power of the word. The essays can fuel discussions in the teaching seminar that explore the basic issues undergirding the principles on which teachers of English try to act with discipline, consistency, and authority.